DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 114 419 TM 004 912

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TITLE Process Evaluation: A Report from the Firing Line.
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Washington, D.C., March 30-April 3, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Evaluation Methods; *Formative Evaluation; Professional Personnel; Program Evaluation

ABSTRACT

The preliminary experiences of a process evaluator contracted to evaluate a three year program to develop Alaskan Native leadership are presented. With hindsight, some characteristics of this particular project having implications for a process evaluator are noted and some general comments on process evaluation, based on the author's experiences, are generated. (RC)

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PROCESS EVALUATION:

A REPORT FROM THE FIRING LINE

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association

Division H Symposium: Applications and Problems in the Conduct of Process Evaluations

Washington, D.C.
April, 1975

TM004 912

The Setting

A three year program to develop Alaskan Native leadership was funded about a year and one half ago by a foundation grant. Its two overall and complementary goals are presently understood to be: (1) meet immediate high level training needs of Alaskan Native,[1] specifically in regards to the regional corporations as they carry out the provisions of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act of 1971, and (2) promote changes in University education which will allow these educational needs to be met long range by a more flexible, responsive system. This project was originally conceived of four years ago as a rather simplistic plan of carrying informal education into outreach centers through Cooperative Extension. At its time of funding it had evolved into the first program ever jointly sponsored by the University of Alaska and a statewide Native organization (the Alaska Native Foundation).

A Program Policy Council was stipulated to consist of seven members (three University, three Native leadership, and one elected by the other six). The council was to oversee and give general directions to the program. The chosen council members are all in powerful positions, including the executive vice president of the University and the director of two University research institutes, the presidents of the Alaska Native Foundation (statewide, non-profit) and the Alaska Federation of Natives (statewide, political). This unique organizational arrangement between University and Native leadership is a prime factor in the evaluation situation.

The Evaluator

As an evaluation specialist at the Center for Northern Educational Research, University of Alaska, I was contracted as a part-time evaluator by, and to work for, the policy council. Some members of the council felt that the process the program was initiating between the University and Native leadership was itself in need of evaluation, whereas emphasis on product could increase in later stages, when training programs and/or other outcomes had been developed.

The idea of doing a process evaluation intrigued me. I first went back and reviewed the evaluation literature on process evaluation methodology. (Process as I am discussing it is concerned broadly with program, rather than its more restrictive use with the learning process.) Many methodologies and models address the concept, with slightly different names and meanings. In the CIPP model (Stufflebeam, 1969) the first P is for process evaluation. The UCLA model (Klein, 1971) divides this evaluation stage into implementation and progress evaluation. Scriven (1967) talks of formative evaluation. Rippey (1973) takes a

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[1] Native is legally defined as a person who is at least one-fourth Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut.

slightly different slant on process which he calls transactional evaluation. The list goes on but basically all are concerned about what is going on or happens within the imaginary black box between input and output. The basic concern is to collect data on what is actually going on, provide information for corrective decision-making action during the project, and to record descriptive information to aid in understanding of later outputs. It can be contrasted to summative, outcome, or product evaluation.

Steele (1973, p. 47) in her review of evaluation approaches, cites as a limitation of her monograph:

> "The lack of clear procedural directions. In summarizing the approaches, priority has gone to the parts that outline the 'what' and 'why' of evaluation rather than those that deal with the 'how' of carrying out the procedure."

I believe this same shortcoming could also be said to characterize process evaluation methodology as it now exists under its varied nomenclature. One can find a considerable amount written about what process evaluation is and why it should be done, but little direction as to how it should be done.

Prior to formal contracting I presented a brief paper to the Council on evaluation, emphasizing the importance of studying process, describing the project and providing data for decision making.

Early Evaluation Attempts

My contract for evaluation services became effective approximately the same time as the project director and two additional staff were hired. The person chosen for director was one of the few Alaskan Natives to hold a doctorate degree and he received faculty rank as well as director position. Though discussion on the project had been going on for several years, and the program policy council had been selected and meeting for a few months, the actual start of the project could be said to have begun at this point.

Logically, I began with the most readily available data, by reviewing the proposal on which the grant was based. The final proposal was written in very general terms leaving the direction of project objectives and activities to the council. In attempting to flush out this information I soon discovered that over a period of time there were actually six proposals. First for my own background and later to be used for the evaluation report, I described the proposals in chart form as to their main components (origin, needs, objectives, methods, advisory process, implications) and analyzed each proposal for the changes it presented as compared to the previous one. This analysis saw an increasing widening of the scope and level of intended educational activities plus increasing Native involvement in decision making.

I noted the final proposal was actually two proposals, one from the University and one from the statewide Native organization. The fact being that as general as the statements were, they were never merged into one, led me to suspect that the two sponsoring agencies may have had differing goals or goal emphasis in mind.

The only other available data at the time I began were brief minutes of the four previous monthly policy council meetings. Given: the vagueness of the proposal; the responsibility left to the council to set directions; the unique aspect of University - Native cooperation on this council; suspected differences of agendas between these groups; and the limited nature of the recorded minutes; I made an immediate decision that my first major expenditure of evaluation effort should be used to attend and observe council meetings, at least until the project got off the ground.

After attending several council meetings it became obvious to me that the project was moving very slowly. Also, from informal conversations, I felt there was general dissatisfaction about the program's progress among council and staff. However, such feelings were not being openly discussed at the council meetings. Therefore, my second decision was to informally interview each member of the council and staff, as to what they thought were the project goals and as to their opinions as to the progress to date. On an individual basis, I found, among other things, that council members freely criticized the staff for not taking more leadership while the staff criticized the council for not setting more consistent and clear directions.

At this point, five months after being hired, I submitted my first process evaluation report. It consisted of: (1) the evaluation overview submitted prior to contracting, (2) the analysis of proposals, (3) an analysis of the council minutes as to frequency of type of business conducted, and a topical and chronological ordering of motions, (4) unidentified interview comments, grouped by subject (goals, the council, the university, the staff, activities, administrative arrangements and evaluation), (5) the evaluator's summation of each section and observations concerning the council, staff, and the evaluation. An introduction requested the council consider this data as information for decision making, noted that it was presented in a way which allowed the council to draw its own conclusions, and added that the evaluator attempted to keep her opinions confined to the last chapter. In addition, the report was presented as a "final draft" and the council was strongly urged to comment individually or collectively as a final chapter for the report.

I had expected to lead the council into the rather bulky evaluation report with an oral presentation using flip charts at the June council meeting. With advice from a management consultant, I had planned to present, in outline form, a rationale for each section, telling what I had done and why, rather than presenting any data, and doing this before handing over the report. However,

June is the beginning of fishing season and it was the only council meeting called that did not receive the necessary quorum to constitute an official meeting. With the July meeting cancelled because of vacations, I decided to mail the report with a cover letter introducing it, rather than wait two months to present it at the next meeting.

Up to this point I felt rather satisfied with my initial efforts at process evaluation. However, the bubble soon burst, as the report did not precipitate discussion among council members at the next meeting, and I only received two rather superficial written comments, even after a follow-up letter. No change in operation and little progress was evident to me for several months thereafter. During a second round of individual interviews, more structured than the first, I found most persons had read some of the report, and some had even considered it interesting and useful in terms of confirming some of their own thoughts, though there was little agreement about which sections were or were not considered useful. I now feel the report was not as useful as I had at first hoped it would be, nor as much of a failure as I at first thought it had been.

The council finally did take corrective action and reassigned the director in December. The latest rounds of interviews leads me to believe that the most meaningful use made of the first process evaluation was as an orientation document for the new director.

Most recently, the project has been actively involved in promoting a new rural delivery system within the University. A comprehensive plan was first proposed by the Native organizations, then sponsored by the project and is now an accepted part of the University's program budget currently under negotiation with the legislature.

(This description has been necessarily brief, leaving out many details and related events. Hopefully, it will provide adequate background for the points which follow.)

Some Project-Specific Observations

With hindsight, there are some characteristics of this particular projec. which have implications for a process evaluator, and I feel need to be noted before making more general comments. The project is not federally funded, was purposely vague in its proposal, and does not have to meet any specific evaluation requirements. It is unique -- there are no programs to compare it to, historically or contemporaneously. The program began at the highest organizational levels possible and was therefore instantly visable. Given the political agendas of those involved and its visability, the project needs to succeed, or cannot easily admit to failure. However, it is hard to say what successful might mean, as differing goals would suggest differing criteria. As a matter of fact, the very ambiguity of

goals allowed the project to come into being. Some might say its very existence in terms of the process of bringing together two divergent communities is in itself success.

Within this politically sensitive and programatically vague setting, I was hired as an evaluator by the program policy council rather than project staff. One problem with this position was that I have only suggestive influence rather than direct control over data collection for staff planned activities, which turned out to be no influence at all. Also, I was at that time a new person to the state and a junior faculty member. On the council, whose process I am to evaluate, sits my direct supervisor, the executive vice-president of my university and two of the most powerful Native leaders in the state. Because of this last fact, I am not sure whether the lack of reaction to my first evaluation report was: (1) a question of time and timing; (2) simply a lack of influence or (3) the overriding importance of politics to data-based decision considerations.

The second evaluation report is yet to be written. From these early experiences, I can predict it will be shorter in length and more judgmental in character than the first.

Some General Comments on Process Evaluation

I would like to use my experience to generate some more general thoughts on process evaluation. These comments are in no particular order of importance or anything else.

(1) The position the process evaluator holds in relation to the project staff and to those setting policy is all important. The level at which this person is to operate, including amount of control over record keeping and influence upon required reporting, is often only hazily defined, in both process evaluation models and in actual practice. There is also a judgment to be made as to whether this function should be an internal or external one, or both.

(2) A process evaluator is probably most necessary when a project is truly breaking new ground and most unsure of its direction. This same lack of definitive program plan of course also presents the evaluator with a most difficult situation in which to work.

(3) Process evaluation methodologies give little guidance as to which results to report and how to go about doing it. The question of with whom to share what information and at what point in time is seldom raised but is almost always a perplexing problem for a process evaluator.

(4) The situational uniqueness of what is described in process evaluations usually voids any contribution toward program replication. However,

process evaluation studies should be useful for their contribution to expanding methodology. For example, having shown a student a description of how transactional evaluation was used successfully in one crisis situation, she was persuaded to try it on her own, whereas just reading about the methodology might not have been as convincing.

(5) More needs to be written on the use of process evaluation in conflict situations -- whether it is possible and, if so, how it can be done without jeopardizing the integrity of the evaluator, and perhaps more importantly, his or her ability to continue in an assigned role.

(6) Educational program process evaluation is usually viewed as a field or activity in isolation. It would seem more useful to attempt to relate it to other fields, such as management consulting, with which process evaluation shares some common interests and methods of operation, but which are longer established as a legitimate practice. The parallels between management consulting and process evaluation seem especially evident when a program falters at the implementation stage of development.

(7) Process evaluation normally assumes the existence of a program plan. Evaluators should consider whether this plan is to be viewed as a guide or contract and, if to some extent a plan is considered flexible, how the process evaluator relates to project staff on this matter.

In my opinion, evaluation requirements of categorical federal programs in terms of pre-specified objectives have led a constricted view of program plans and defensive evaluations. Such evaluations tend to be of little use for improving programs and run great risks of missing unintended or unanticipated effects.

(8) What are the ethics or advisability of accepting a contract to do a process evaluation with the details unspecified? Is this a desirable or undesirable situation for an evaluator? If one accepts such a contract, how does one identify a plan and to whom, if anyone, need it be communicated?

(9) Finally, are there some programs that should not be evaluated, especially during their conduct as in a process evaluation? Evaluation, particularly that of a formative nature, attributes a rationality to the decision-making process which may not be realistic in all cases. Projects that are highly political in nature might work more effectively without program evaluation as we now know it; or, it is more to the point to suggest we need to rethink and expand our concept and methodology of process evaluation so as to make it more usable for a greater variety of educational programs.

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